A hope to believe in. A Transition Programme to support mature students in accessing Higher Education. A Case Study from Surrey, England

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'Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right'
Henry Ford, 1947

Abstract

This chapter discusses a case-study from a Higher Education institution in Surrey, where a project of pedagogical innovation, the 'Transition Programme', successfully solved the paradoxical status of selective procedures that are caught between the principle of inclusiveness within the widening participation agenda and the contrasting principle of recruiting with integrity. The chapter is motivated by four main aims. The first aim is to use hope to contextualise sociologically the motivations underpinning mature applicants' choice to access Higher Education. The second aim is to approach such choice as a movement from the familiar world to a more complex social world, characterised by risky decision. A third, and probably central, aim is to criticise the implications of selective processes for mature applicants' trust in the Higher Education system, as well as their well-being, self-esteem and happiness. Finally, a fourth aim is for the author to re-contextualise within a discourse centred on hope in the Transition Programme.

Introduction

This chapter discusses a case-study from a Higher Education (HE) institution in Surrey, where a project of pedagogical innovation, the 'Transition Programme' (TP), successfully solved the paradoxical status of selective procedures that are caught between the principle of inclusiveness within the widening participation agenda and the contrasting principle of recruiting with integrity. The negative effect of that paradox is particularly felt by non-traditional (henceforth defined as

'mature') applicants, because the recruiting with integrity principle imposes restrictive criteria based on academic skills and knowledge that represent the weakest aspect of most mature students' profiles entering HE from unique vocational directions. The case study concerns the support provided to mature applicants aiming to access a Foundation Degree[1].

Mature students hoping to enter higher education, for instance through the Foundation Degree used as a case study in this contribution, are particularly at risk of exclusion due to academic skills being not in line with recruitment criteria or requirements. Mature students deciding to re-enter education are at risk of being turned away from their right to progress academically due to rigid or docile interpretation by those i) perceiving entry criteria ii) repeating inherited procedures iii) conforming to internal systems or structures.

In the HE institution where the TP was going to be implemented concern had been expressed for a while regarding the potential impact and harm outcomes had on applicants whose unique profile/skills could not be fully measured or appreciated, for instance 'what happens to declined applicants?' This question provoked four years of declined applications to be reviewed, a decision and process driven by concern for the potential harm to the well-being of – and hope for – those aspiring to enter education. There was a need to re-establish social connectiveness and support (Idan and Margalit, 2013). Justifications relating to a deficit in applicants' skills having prevented applicant progression were analysed using application documentation. The outcomes of the analysis were then used to construct a short 12-week programme 'The Transition Programme' that aimed to extend and support the following academic skills: close reading; note taking; referencing; sourcing material; internet use and searches; argument; evaluation; analysis; reflection; dialogic discussion and argument; summarising and concluding. Applicants unable to progress academically due to 'not meeting a set of criteria' would now have opportunity for transferable skills to be recognised, acknowledged and enhanced. The Transition Programme was developed so that mature applicants had the possibility to transition and undertake academic progression goals to 'enhance and prepare for their academic journey' to build on what they already know and can do rather than applying a deficit model of educational assessment that focuses on *what* mature applicants *do not do or know* (Snyder, 2006).

[1] FdA are equivalent to the first two years of an honours bachelor's degree. On completion of two years of full-time studies, students can choose to undertake a top-up year towards an honour's degree.

The importance of the Transition Programme (TP) goes far beyond the solution of organisational dilemmas. The TP offers applicants who do not fully meet, 'traditional' academic standards, as defined by the HE sector and professional bodies, extra-provision to advance their academic profile and skills. The completion of the TP is a condition embedded in an offer to undertake the degree journey. In this way, inclusiveness is combined with integrity in recruitment whilst acknowledging transferable skills, agentic thinking and possibility. This chapter argues that the TP positively engages with mature applicants' risk-taking attitude, their perception of themselves as a learner, as well as their self-esteem, resilience, trust in the system and that peculiar perspective on the future called 'hope'.

Hope is a requisite for risky decision making, in situations where the outcomes of decisions are most uncertain although almost possible (Zimmerman, 1990; Synder, 2006; Christens, Collura, Tahir; 2013). The decision to access HE without the support of a standard academic background is a good example of an attitude towards risk, because it adds uncertainty to a life-world that could otherwise be comfortable or enjoyed in the relative safety of a familiar professional world. Without hope and hopeful thinking, it is unlikely that mature applicants would choose to venture into the exploration of HE. Like trust, however, hope is susceptible to disappointment whilst, unlike faith, hope does not operate in counterfactual ways. For instance, failure can invite us to revoke hope, maybe to retreat to more familiar worlds, to be divergent and find other means towards goals. However, individuals fluctuate between low to high levels of hope (Cheavens, 2000) determined by childhood blueprints of behaviour formed during life experiences and realms of reality that enable (or not) how outcomes are reacted to. Individuals more inclined towards high hope are found to respond more positively to challenges using their resilience to 'bounce back' faster in comparison to individuals inclined to have low hope. Higher levels of personal hope motivate positive outlooks and self-perception so that change, expectations and achievements are managed within a can do, do do and, will do attitude (Synder, 2002; Margalit and Idan, 2004).

In this chapter it is argued that during the encounter of the mature applicant applying to enter HE, hope and hopefulness is found although there are many variables at this stage which impact on hope. This is the point TP intersects with hope. Functioning as a tool to relieve the restrictive principles of conditional selection by alleviating selective pressure, the TP empowers hope. The TP makes risky personal projects more credible, aligns future empirical experiences with hope

and, probably most importantly, supports applicants' to trust hope. To trust hope reinforces hopefulness behaviour.

In the first section of the chapter mainstream procedures used to identify and support mature students are critiqued, and an assessment is offered of whether policies translate into interactions that support candidates' trust within practice. Also, the pivotal function of hope as a support for students' risk-taking behaviour is discussed. An important characteristic of the first section is that an under-conceptualised term such as hope is approached from a theoretically-informed position, therefore in line with the scope of this edited collection. In the second section, the case study is presented as an exemplar to explore organisational and interactional tools that transform applicant selection into an opportunity for recognition and celebration of people's diverse identities, experience and transferable skills. It is shown that hegemonic semantics about mature students can be challenged and critically reflected upon through innovative procedures for assessment and selection. Based on intensive interviews with applicants as well as on the analysis of reflective observations collected via personal journals by students during their academic journey, the second section presents a conceptual framework for understanding the journey that mature students' take during the risky decision and path to enter HE towards an empowering experience of inclusion, based on hope. The decision to access HE is an important and potentially pivotal event for the complex narratives of the self that constitute the professional, academic and personal identity of the applicants. Synder (2006) and Folkman (2010) recognise levels of satisfaction and decisions to find ones place in the world evolve to develop new schemas of hope influenced by personal experiences, contexts and interaction with others.

A successful journey starts with the shock of entering a largely unknown territory such as HE, leaving familiar life-worlds (displacement, see Giddens, 1991) and inherited identarian labels (Fass, 2004; 2007). In order to reach a destination from where to claim empowered identity, learning spaces and times (re-territorialisation, see Deleuze and Guattari, 2004), the capability to project him- or herself in the future with some degree of indifference towards the risk of failure or personal fear, what is here defined as hope, is necessary. However, hope can be harmed from the beginning of the journey, that is, from the selective access to HE: negative experiences disconfirm the validity of personal projections and goals into the future based on trust.

From a perspective centred on the applicants' subjective experiences, the TP can be understood as a procedural innovation that transforms selection from a situation where hope is challenged to a social space where hope is celebrated, connected with and reinforced through support offered to applicants in order to strengthen their academic profile towards inclusion into HE. This latter point is probably the core message that the chapter aims to elucidate in the next sections, but not before some conceptual clarifications.

Section 1: A conceptual framework

Selection and the sociological gaze

The chapter develops a discussion on the interplay between hope and organisational procedures, arguing that such relationships are not necessarily conflictual, as demonstrated by the case study presented in this contribution. The case study is extracted by the long professional experience of the author as a tutor and manager of a degree programme in Early Childhood Studies (ECS), characterised by a sizeable population of mature applicants. The case of the Foundation Degree Programme (FdA[2]) will be considered, as the programme of choice of mature learners working within the Early Years sector. The majority of applicants who undertake the 'earn whilst you learn' progression route are often the first in their family to enter HE, who may not have possessed entry qualifications or opportunities to access HE as a school leaver. The selection of applicants is based on the evaluation of a minimal set of academic skills and professional qualifications as well as experiences of working with young children, assessed through documentation presented by the candidate at interview and upon application.

As applies to all selective processes within the education system, when we make selection for access to the FdA the object of sociological analysis, a rich variety of intellectual stimula emerge. The selection of FdA applicants is a regulated decision, enshrined in organisational procedures. Two sets of criteria define the general framework of the selection. Firstly, the selection must meet the requirements of 'recruitment with integrity'[3] and must at the same time secure the principle of 'widening participation' (HEFCE 2014; 2015; 2017). Already at the level of the most general

[2] FdA stands for Foundation Degree Associate. The name links to an old form of two years HE Diploma called Associate Degrees, offered by some UK institutions in the first half of the twentieth century.

[3] Recruitment with integrity is defined by HEFCE as recruiting applicants only when they meet the minimum requirements to undertake the programme of study.

criteria, it is evident that political decision-makers impose two concepts, widening participation and recruitment with integrity that are possibly in a paradoxical relationship.

As selection has to be implemented, two contrasting forces clash. Widening participation entails adjusting the threshold for admission, particularly regarding academic skills. On the contrary, recruiting with integrity means that applicants who are not expected to possess minimal skills or experiences to succeed should not be admitted onto the FdA. Paradoxically whilst widening participation is an inclusive force, recruitment with integrity is an opposed selective force. The need to solve such a paradox is one of the main drivers for the pedagogical and organisation innovation presented in this chapter.

The second set of criteria is offered by the subject benchmark statement for Early Childhood Studies. The subject benchmark defines the expected Early Years professionals' competencies in terms of knowledge and skills (QAA, 2014; Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies, 2018). Whilst the subject benchmark is interested in clarifying what professionals must know as well as what a professional must be able to apply in practice, at the same time, the benchmark contributes to profiling the persona of an *ideal* Early Years professional. By doing that, the subject benchmark allows a measurement between the applicant and the idealised professional to be forged by the academic course, and from that to assess the credibility of the candidature. The subject benchmark therefore represents another selective factor which is added to the recruitment with integrity principle, limiting the scope of the widening participation approach.

Due to contrasting forces and the somehow contradictory nature of political guidelines, the position of applicants to the FdA is most uncertain. Facing a binary decision is surely expected by the applicant; the success/unsuccess distinction is so intrinsic in modern society that any selection process with either outcome appears natural and unavoidable. However, and this is the justification and rationale of the chapter, the binary decision is an organisational arrangement that can be changed through organisational decisions. The paradoxical relationship between widening participation on the one hand and recruiting with integrity and subject benchmark on the other hand is a Gordian knot to be cut with creative thinking. After all, such paradox is much more than an organisation dilemma. The battle between widening participation and selective forces is a battle between hope and fears, hopefulness and hopelessness, between risk-taking and risk-avoidance, between opening doors and the fear to walk through. Cutting the knot therefore became at once a

practical and philosophical aim, the object for the author of this chapter of a professional and personal engagement.

Hope as a sociological concept

Moving somehow closer to psychological regions, the decision to access HE entails the decision to risk some degree of ontological security, at least regarding professional identity, emotional safety and self-esteem. The acknowledgement of the delicate position of the applicants has been already presented earlier in the chapter as an ethical drive for the author to implement the innovation of selective practices. Ontological security is used within the conceptual framework built by Erik Erikson when researching the behaviour of children (Erikson, 1963). According to Erikson, the first social achievement of a child is the ability to be separated from the mother without feelings of rage or fear, depending on achievement of inner certainty about the external conditions (the intentions of the mother). Bridging Erikson's psychological insights back to sociological argumentations, ontological security can be used to refer to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action. Ontological security is produced, while producing, the world of familiarity 'our safe haven and space'. A sense of the reliability of persons and things is pivotal for ontological security. The sense of reliability, which clearly depends on repetition and stability, is unavoidably hindered during the movement towards, and immersion into HE, which represent a highly unfamiliar world towards the *unknown*. Indeed, it is pertinent to wonder what does motivate such a decision? Te Riele (2010) argues that hope is a vital resource and drive for individuals to explore and imagine alternative outcomes, realities and futures. Erikson's eight stage theory of man captures that individuals who are able to reflect and delve into previous life experiences and outcomes retrospectively can build on, learn from and shape outcomes and goal-oriented thinking. A discussion on selection can describe how an organisational process works but it does not allow us to explore what underpins or inspires the decision to apply for the FdA. In other words, what is needed is a conceptual tool to reflect on applicants' motivation. That tool was recognised in the concept of hope.

In a social world which is more complex than any observer can compute, that is, in a social world where any choice is unavoidably made from a situation of partial ignorance with regard both to its presuppositions and its consequences (Luhmann, 2005), hope is a basic social need. Where there

is hope there are increased possibilities for experience and action, because hope constitutes an effective form of support during risky decision making. Complexity and uncertainty create the need for hope (Snyder, Rand and Sigmon, 2002).

In many situations, of course, one can choose whether to hope, or not. But it is argued here that a complete absence of hope (hopelessness) would prevent participation in a complex society molded by risks (Beck, 2013). Hope can be used to describe an attitude or disposition (Dunn, 1994) that allows decision making toward future outcomes that are known to be potentially negative. Taking a risk will of course depend on decision, will and levels of control, to the extent that the outcome of a risky decision motivated by *self* is influenced by the actions of others. It is true that the distance between purposeful action and unavoidable uncertainty can be addressed by planning (rational choice). For instance, this is the case of organisational behaviour (Hernes, 2015). From a sociological perspective, planning is the artificial reconstruction of an unknown future into a horizon that can be embraced by rational decision-making. However, planning is a tool to reduce risk, not a motivation to undertake risky behaviour when less risky options would be available, for instance, remaining in a more familiar world. '*If we always do what we always did, we will always get, what we always got*' is an eloquent adagio to motivate risky decision making, but what about when what we got offers us relative safety?

This is an important point for the present discussion. The applicants to the FdA could have remained within the boundaries of a familiar world when the need for risky decision making is limited. Utilising the tools offered by phenomenology, familiarity can be defined as a subject's general view of the lived life. The familiar world is therefore quite safe because it consists of certain situations, and only very limited risks deal with future or complexity. In the familiar world, which is full of facts that allow planning and support expectations, the need of hope is limited. However, the modern condition is a condition where the achievement of a totally familiar world is impossible. The participation in society from a position other than marginal demands the subjects to make risk selections. Familiarity cannot support the subject in managing complexity. Familiarity is not a solution but an alternative to complexity (retreating in the familiar world). Familiarity is therefore it is nowadays a residual element of social contexts that are characterised by new possibilities but also by mutual dependency, intransparency and lack of integration that all converge in generate uncertainty.

In the movement from a familiar to an unfamiliar world, planning might have helped some applicants to rationalise the decision to apply; however, what planning cannot do is to support decision-making, for instance, the decision to apply to the FdA. It is argued here that hope was the support for the applicants' risky decision-making. The complexity presented by an unknown future where applicants are to sail the uncharted waters of HE cannot be reduced by planning. But it can be reduced by hope. Hope allows some degree of indifference towards risks that cannot be erased because they do only partially depend on the subject's choices. Gilman, Dooley and Florell (2006) and Gilman and Anderman (2006) consider high hope and low hope dispositions offer insight into risk taking

Taking another angle, hope can be understood as a support to decision-making that is known to generate risks. Any possible negative consequence of the decision to apply to the FdA would not have arisen within the familiar world but it is experienced by a component of decisions and actions. Hope is the resource that supports the acceptance of risk, in a situation where the alternative, the security of the familiar world appears to reduce possibilities for action. When the problem of hope is examined, it cannot be viewed in the familiar world but in a world of risks. Hope is one response to the complexity created by risks. Beyond the applicants' need for hope there are self-produced risks, which constrain them to make new decisions as opposed to the complex decision demanded by the somehow smaller familiar world.

Without hope, individuals' lives would be led to, and by, feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation. The absence of hope reduces the range of possibilities for rational action. Without hope, the subject does not have the attitude that enables him/her to take risks. Generated through a robust theoretical discussion, this statement is considered as an effective way to present the relationship between hope, the choice to access to HE and the position within the system, at once both solid and fragile, of the mature applicants to the FdA.

Section 2: the case study

Who is non-traditional?

Through a case-study concerning the innovation of selection procedures for the access to an FdA programme in ECS offered by a HE institution in Surrey, the second section of the chapter discusses decisions aimed to reinforce and celebrate applicants' hope in the context of selection,

which represent the crucial contact point between hope and organisational structures and procedures.

Like hope, selection leans to the future; however, if approached as a procedure to distribute the access to HE, selection also looks back to the past. The academic and professional biographies and life stories of the applicants represent the influence that the past holds on the selection process from the institutional point of view and this is probably as much important as the influence that the past holds on the motivations and decision of the applicant from a personal perspective. After all, the very scope of the widening participation agenda, that is to overcome 'dispositional barriers' formed during previous education and/or life experiences (Department of Employment and Learning, 2010) connects hope in the future with decision made in the present and past experiences. Moreover, the professionals who represent the access point to HE when encountering the applicants during selective interviews maybe be influenced by variables rooted in the past, for instance inherited beliefs and categorisations about the applicants or established procedure and criteria that limit the possibility for decision-making. Such factors contribute towards high and low hope expectations and projections (Cheavens, 2000).

The importance of selection as the access point to HE for the preservation of applicants' hope imposed to the author a great deal of attention towards the cues, often to be found in language, for categorisations and stereotypes about the applicant that can affect the experience of the access point to the institution, and with it to HE. An example of her attention to the empirical cues for categorisations that obscure the unique, multi-dimensional person of each candidate consists in the author's challenge to the label of 'non-traditional' attached to applicants to the FdA. Words do not only mirror but constitute social reality; moreover, the meaning of words is always a two-sided coin: one side what the word signify, on the other side, what the same word signify-not. This applies to 'non-traditional'; the meaning of non-traditional cannot be separated from the reference to what 'non-traditional' is not, that is, 'not non-traditional', 'traditional' and, with an easy semantic leap, 'normal'. Subsequently, words hold meaning whilst at the same time project inherited cultural beliefs and dominant structures that are value laden. Bakhtin's double voiced discourse (1963, 1984) illuminates how words and dialogue embed and reinforce power, conforming both consciously and unconsciously. For instance, the term 'non-traditional' is used to categorise a group of students entering HE mainly via vocational routes as opposed to traditional

students progressing into HE from school. Dominant beliefs regarding both routes do not necessarily need to be acknowledged directly although within the education sector one progression route has been more dominant, preferred and celebrated. The polarisation between traditional and non-traditional generate social semantics, such as a deficit model for those students/applicants who are non-traditional, as opposed to the "normal" traditional students. A deficit model is the matrix for the production of knowledge on non-traditional students/applicants, for instance their need to catch up or make good, the need to reform themselves, the very idea that they are defined by their condition of need.

Another perspective, based on the idea that the decision to enter HE is an eloquent claim of empowerment, hope and trust, invited new words to be found to refer to the applicants, words not entailing a semantics of deficit, inadequacy, inferiority (Eraut, 1994). The term 'mature' was therefore chosen and utilised in the planning and implementation of the innovation of system of selection for the admission to the FdA in ECS. However, the very fact that a new term for non-traditional students has been sought and changed to mature students somehow draws further attention to difference and power (Bakhtine, 1963, 1984). A few words should be spent to discuss the characteristic of FdA programme in the English HE system.

Cutting the knot

Foundation degrees/FdA were introduced in 2001 as a pillar of the 'widening participation' agenda of the Labour administration. FdA are equivalent to the first two years of an honours bachelor's degree; their scope is to enable those working in a specific sector to progress academically, professionally and personally by systematising and exposing to critical reflection their mature experience, skills and expertise. On completion of two years of full-time studies (always organised to allow employed people to attend the lectures and seminars, for example, by scheduling them one evening a week and one Saturday a month) students can choose to undertake a top-up year towards an honours degree.

While governments' policies over the best part of two decades have been recognising the need for more inclusive HE to support social mobility, the paradoxical nature of the selection processes has often failed in creating the conditions for inclusion. Cutting the Gordian knot was the scope of the innovation discussed in this chapter to combine: 1) effective delivery with positive outcomes for student achievement and experience (recruiting with integrity, see also UK Quality Code produced

by the Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, 2018) and, 2) inclusiveness to empower and celebrate applicants' hope. The selection process is the point of access where applicants' hope encounters the reality of organisations. The question is: how was that Gordian knot cut?

The solution developed by the author was to bypass the unsolvable dilemma between selection and inclusion by incorporating inclusion within selection. Incorporating inclusiveness into selection was underpinned by an understanding of the selection process as possible initial phase of the learning journey. Not the nemesis, but the celebration of hope. The combination of inclusiveness and selectivity was achieved through the design and implementation of the 'Transition Programme' (TP). The TP was a compulsory short course provided by the institution to applicants who did not fully meet the academic standards at the point of their enrolment.

The first challenge for the TP was that the majority of FdA mature applicants had not undertaken previous academic study, often lacking the GCSE in core subjects identified by HEFCE (2017), the Children's Workforce Development Council (2010) and QAA (2014). Key questions for the TP, then, focused on how to prevent the selection process hindering the well-being of those who might not have been qualified to access the FdA and how to preserve and empower hope in those aiming to access HE.

The severity of the challenge was clear to the applicants as well. This is suggested by the following comments that the applicants shared through their reflective journals. Reflective journals were a requirement of the FdA programme for students to record and interact with their thinking, experiences and challenges. Personal, professional and academic areas of daily life were used to reflect on, learn from and link to theory. The comments from the reflective journal also suggest the dynamic coexistence of hope (otherwise the applicant would have never moved towards HE) and negative expectations based on reflective narratives of past educational experiences.

> I never thought I would be able to undertake a degree
> No one in my family has ever been to college or university
> I don't know if I can do it, am I clever enough?
> What happens if I fail my first assignment will I get chucked out?
> I'm not very good at maths and never will be
> I'm not very good at writing or English
> What happens if I don't get onto the programme, what else can I do?

An applicant commented, when asked why she wanted to access the FdA programme during the interview:

> I never had an opportunity to continue studying at 16, there was never any other expectation other than getting a job. University was never on the landscape for my parents or me. In fact, even at school I never had any conversation about the possibility of going to university. Those children that did were high flyers, in all the top classes and sets. They had an air about them that we all knew meant they wouldn't be working at 16 like the rest of us…it was unsaid…or just expected

The comments indicate how applicants themselves, and not just the culture of HE, were focusing on deficit from the past, rather than hope for the future. Penn (2005), Ben-Ari (1996), and Wolf (1990) refer to forms of acculturation to account for the power of negative expectations and their influence towards risk avoiding behaviour. Evident here is a battle between hope and concurrent preparation for negative outcomes of decision based on hope, rather on than the empowerment and confirmation of hope through the celebration of the things that applicants are good at (Mezirow, 2001). An applicant, when invited to present something positive about herself to capture her strengths to match selective application criteria, was particularly negative about her profile. As the author asked:

> so with all of those barriers you have self-assessed and identified, what influenced you to still apply for this programme? What inner strengths do you have inside you that took no notice of those barriers and got you to this stage of your progression?

The applicant looked at her and was unable to answer and after one minute tears rolled from her eyes. The question was about hope, but the applicant could not translate her hope in a form of personal strength, she found it easier to focus on her challenges. Such an emotional response communicated that previous educational experiences had always been negative; at the same time, the same response was communicating that the applicant knew there was more to her than the label she identified with or had inherited. The emotional labour needed to share or listen to individual expressions during such exchanges can be emotive (Hochschild, 1983; Ashford, 1995). Prensky (2001:1) reminds us quite simply that "our students have changed radically. Today's students are

no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach". Yet the need to label and measure continues.

Celebrating hope

The above examples, combined with many other similar experiences, motivated the creation of the TP. Rather than setting applicants up to fail by measuring their academic profile on access, the idea was to tackle personal and academic barriers *during* the FdA programme. Both concrete and abstract knowledge and experiences were used to support our creative and reflective discussion to consider how academic skills could be supported through a short programme. McKenzie's (1990) reflective framework was utilised to transform the selective interviews in data to inform the development of the TP.

In order to implement this idea, the TP devised three strategies: 1) to offer extended time to complete the two years programme; 2) to identify short courses or training opportunities to support skills deficit; 3) to_set up employer or mentor network focusing on employment or offer work based experience opportunities. Analysis of vocational and academic skills during recruitment enabled the author to open a progression route constructed specifically to meet mature students' needs while meeting the institutions' statutory duties as well. Applicants were offered a bespoke programme, transforming selection criteria into the first step within HE, therefore into a celebration of hope. In other words, the TP transformed potentially inadequate applicants into students to be supported from within HE.

The evaluation of interview records, online level two[4] tests and written tasks suggested that the core barrier faced by applicants to be addressed through the TP were close reading, spelling, grammar, essay structure, ICT, online research, how to use library resources, speaking in front of peers, difference between description and evaluative. These academic traits evaluated during the interview process became the core skills and focus of the TP. The TP has been developed as a modular and sequential provision; modular as the academic barriers are challenged by tutors and students through specialised modules; sequential because the TP is organised so that each academic skill conquered can be used as a tool to overcome a subsequent barrier. The sequential organisation of the TP is influenced by Piaget's accommodation and assimilation theory (Piaget,

[4] In English HE Level 2 corresponds to the academic standards for successful completion of secondary education or equivalent.

1952), combined with Skemp (1989) relational learning theory of purposeful deep level learning to support the identified skills deficit.

The delivery of the modules was largely guided by Fowler and Robbins (2006) idea of mentor and mentee cooperative reflection, so perspectives and outcomes are challenged, guided and provoked to consider other possibilities. The choice of looking at the delivery as a social situation involving a mentor and a mentee rather than a teacher and a learner was quite innovative, with respect to the culture or the organisation at that time. But the idea of cooperative reflection entails something more: according to Fowler and Robbins, whilst the mentor's expertise has the responsibility to offer a framework of support, the mentee and the mentor learn from each other. This is therefore an alternative to the well-known scaffolding model, because the mentor is prepared to 'dance with the mentee', following the mentee lead, for instance utilising mentee's reflection on personal and professional experiences as a foundation for learning, as a sort of co-constructed and always changing textbook (Schon, 1987).

The organisational rationale, of the TP, as well as its ethical drive, was to empower applicants at the very the point of access into HE, by creating a reality where hope, that is, the motivation to undertake risky behaviour, was associated with success on acceptance to the FdA. The function of the TP was to secure the development of the required academic skills in the course of the FdA, working with students after admission, as opposed to the established procedure asking applicants to demonstrate such skills as a condition for enrolment. Working with students rather than probing applicants could be an eloquent statement to describe the innovation advanced by the TP.

The TP worked as a 'bridging course' between academic levels, offering a solution to the paradoxical coexistence between selectivity and integrity in recruitment on the one hand, and inclusiveness and empowerment of mature students on the other hand. Hope can be damaged by negative outcomes of decision fuelled by it; however, the opposite is true as well. That is, hope can be reinforced when decisions based on it prove to be successful. Similarly to trust, hope is certainly a risky investment in the beginning, but hope is nevertheless something that can be learnt experience after experience, until it become a working structure orientating social behaviour.

Funding for the TP had been discussed with local stakeholders and boroughs who at the time were aiming to upskill the workforce to meet KPI's in view of recent skills audits and targets planned to upskill early years professionals within private, maintained and voluntary settings. Once the TP was designed and ready for implementation, the first cohort of 18 students were contacted after

their interviews stating that they would be accepted onto the FdA Early Years programme if they undertook a 12 weeks course to compliment and support their academic skills. This was the solution to the paradox of selection and inclusivity in a nutshell: embedding inclusive practices (the TP) into selection (conditional admission). Twelve students agreed to undertake the TP (these students would have previously not been accepted onto the programme).

The face to face delivery of the TP was scheduled weekly from 6 to 9pm in the evening. The planned organisation of the delivery (with a high degree of flexibility in order to accommodate the personal input from the student) was based in a first part of the session focussed on induction of computer, library and college resources, and a second part devoted to reflective professional and personal skills audit. In the second part of the session, students undertook SWOT analysis to identify personal, professional and academic strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Academic skills were then introduced through reflection on activities and case-studies, to make use of the professional skills and dialogue often well developed in the cohort of students via a community of practice framework that promotes participation (Fleer, 2003). Both parts of the sessions were designed to help develop a learning community of practice, which was considered vital to provide students with the skills to function effectively in a dynamic, information-rich and continuously changing environment, as suggested by UNESCO (2003).

The TP was careful in not opposing academia to employment; on the contrary, it looked at how students already analyse, evaluate, argue and synthesise within their personal or professional life. The aim of the programme was to enable by translating already applied skills from life experiences and practice into academic terms and language. During the delivery of the TP, the teaching staff gathered data and feedback from students to ask them to explain exact barriers they experienced and felt could prevent progression. Continuing students' feedback allowed reflecting on action (Dewey, 1966; Schon, 1987; Moon, 1999; Altricther and Posch, 2000), enabling what Loughran and Berry define a 'developing pedagogy', that is, as they state "organised with a curricular focus based on explicitly modelling particular aspects of teaching so that we can unpack these aspects of teaching with our students through professional critiques of practice" (Loughran and Berry 2005: 2). Based on feedback on observations, translation between academic and professional life quickly became the main tool for teaching, proving to be extremely effective and supportive in establishing hope, realising ambition and increasing student recognition of what they were already able to do and would be able to build upon in the future.

Conclusion

On conclusion, and on reflection, the author would suggest that the chapter fulfilled a number of aims, some of them not foreseen on planning of the chapter. The first aim was to attempt a conceptual clarification in order to utilise hope as a tool to contextualise sociologically the motivations underpinning mature applicants' choice to access Higher Education. A second aim was to submit the mature applicants' choice to access Higher Education to sociological scrutiny, approaching it as a movement from the familiar world to a more complex social world, characterised not by repetition of patterns and behaviour but risky decisions. A third aim was to explore the implications of selective process for mature applicants' trust in the Higher Education system, as well as their well-being, self-esteem and happiness. A fourth aim was for the author to re-contextualise within a discourse centred on hope the Transition Programme, a project of pedagogical innovation that she designed and implemented to promote inclusiveness while securing recruitment with integrity into Higher Education.

From an institutional perspective, the Transition Programme was addressed to transform a selective process for the access to Higher Education from a stressful and potentially hurtful clash between applicants' hope and institutional rules into a celebration and confirmation of mature applicants' hope. However, and the author believes most importantly, the Transition Programme was an investment to preserve and celebrate applicants' trust in their own hope, recognising hope as a necessary tool to support continuing decision making in complex, unfamiliar and therefore uncertain environments. Since its inception, the TP has been delivered to many cohorts of students to support academic and professional progression. The most interesting piece of data refers to the observable correlation between less restrictive selection and increased levels of retention and progression from the Foundation Degree to a full degree. An apparently impossible coexistence of inclusiveness for wider participation and high demands entailed in recruitment with integrity was secured through the Transition Programme by preserving applicants' hope from the Moloch of bureaucratised selection, combined with an organised, and resourced, strategy to support the attainment of necessary academic skills in the course of the programme.

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